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One wintry afternoon in February 1891, three men were engaged in earnest conversation in London. From that conversation were to flow consequences of the greatest importance to the British Empire and to the world as a whole. For these men were organizing a secret society that was, for more than fifty years, to be one of the most important forces in the formulation and execution of British imperial and foreign policy.

The three men who were thus engaged were already well known in England. The leader was Cecil Rhodes, fabulously wealthy empire-builder and the most important person in South Africa. The second was William T. Stead, the most famous, and probably also the most sensational, journalist of the day. The third was Reginald Baliol Brett, later known as Lord Esher, friend and confidant of Queen Victoria, and later to be the most influential adviser of King Edward VII and King George V.

... the three drew up a plan of organization for their secret society and a list of original members. The plan of organization provided for an inner circle, to be known as "The Society of the Elect," and an outer circle, to be known as "The Association of Helpers." Within The Society of the Elect, the real power was to be exercised by the leader, and a "Junta of Three." The leader was to be Rhodes, and the junta was to be Stead, Brett, and Alfred Miler. In accordance with this decision, Miter was added to the society by Stead ...

The creation of this secret society was not a matter of a moment... Rhodes had been planning for this event for more than seventeen years. Stead had been introduced to the plan on 4 April 1889, and Brett had been told of it on 3 February 1890. Nor was the society thus founded an ephemeral thing, for, in modified form, it exists to this day. From 1891 to 1902, it was known to only a score of persons. During this period, Rhodes was leader, and Stead was the most influential member. From 1902 to 1925, Milner was leader, while Philip Kerr (Lord Lothian) and Lionel Curtis were probably the most important members. From 1925 to 1940, Kerr was leader, and since his death in 1940 this role has probably been played by Robert Henry Brand (now Lord Brand).

During this period of almost sixty years, this society has been called by various names. During the first decade or so it was called "the secret society of Cecil Rhodes" or "the dream of Cecil Rhodes." In the second and third decades of its existence it was known as "Milner's Kindergarten" (1901-1910) and as "the Round Table Group" (1910-1920). Since 1920 it has been called by various names, depending on which phase of its activities was being examined. It has been called "The Times crowd," "the Rhodes crowd," the "Chatham House crowd," the "All Souls group," and the "Cliveden set." All of these terms were more or less inadequate, because they focused attention on only part of the society or on only one of its activities. The Miler Kindergarten and the Round Table Group, for example, were two different names for The Association of Helpers and were thus only part of the society, since the real center of the organization, The Society of the Elect, continued to exist and recruited new members from the outer circle as seemed necessary. Since 1920, this Group has been increasingly dominated by the associates of Viscount Astor. In the 1930s, the misnamed "Cliveden set" was close to the center of the society, but it would be entirely unfair to believe that the connotations of superficiality and conspiracy popularly associated with the expression "Cliveden set" are a just description of the Milner Group as a whole. In fact, Viscount Astor was, relatively speaking, a

late addition to the society, and the society should rather be pictured as utilizing the Astor money to further their own ideals rather than as being used for any purpose by the master of Cliveden.

Even the expression "Rhodes secret society," which would be perfectly accurate in reference to the period 1891-1899, would hardly be accurate for the period after 1899. The organization was so modified and so expanded by Milner after the eclipse of Stead in 1899, and especially after the death of Rhodes in 1902, that it took on quite a different organization and character, although it continued to pursue the same goals. To avoid this difficulty, we shall generally call the organization the "Rhodes secret society" before 1901 and "the Milner Group" after this date, but it must be understood that both terms refer to the same organization.

This organization has been able to conceal its existence quite successfully, and many of its most influential members, satisfied to possess the reality rather than the appearance of power, are unknown even to close students of British history. This is the more surprising when we learn that one of the chief methods by which this Group works has been through propaganda. It plotted the Jameson Raid of 1895; it caused the Boer War of 1899-1902; it set up and controls the Rhodes Trust; it created the Union of South Africa in 1906-1910; it established the south African periodical *The State* in 1908; it founded the British Empire periodical *The Round Table* in 1910, and this remains the mouthpiece of the Group; it has been the most powerful single influence in All Souls, Balliol, and New Colleges at Oxford for more than a generation; it has controlled *The Times* for more than fifty years, with the exception of the three years 1919-1922; it publicized the idea of and the name "British Commonwealth of Nations" in the period 1908-1918; it was the chief influence in Lloyd George's war administration in 1917-1919 and dominated the British delegation to the Peace Conference of 1919; it had a great deal to do with the formation and management of the League of Nations and of the system of mandates; it founded the Royal Institute of International Affairs in 1919 and still controls it; it was one of the chief influences on British policy toward Ireland, Palestine, and India in the period 1917-1945; it was a very important influence on the policy of appeasement of Germany during the years 1920-1940; and it controlled and still controls, to a very considerable extent, the sources and the writing of the history of British Imperial and foreign policy since the Boer War.

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Among the ideas of [Arnold] Toynbee which influenced the Miler Group we should mention three: (a) a conviction that the history of the British Empire represents the unfolding of a great moral idea - the idea of freedom - and that the unity of the Empire could best be preserved by the cement of this idea; (b) a conviction that the first call on the attention of any man should be a sense of duty and obligation to serve the state; and (c) a feeling of the necessity to do social service work (especially educational work) among the working classes of English society. These ideas were accepted by most of the men whose names we have already mentioned and became dominant principles of the Milner Group later. Toynbee can also be regarded as the founder of the method used by the Group later, especially in the Round Table Groups and in the Royal Institute of International Affairs.

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The Milner Group could never have been built up by Milner's own efforts. He had no political power or even influence. All that he had was ability and ideas. The same thing is true about many of the other members of the Miler Group, at least at the time that they joined the Group. The power that was utilized by Milner and his Group was really the power of the Cecil family and its allied families such as the Lyttelton (Viscounts Cobham), Wyndham (Barons Leconfield),

Grosvenor (Dukes of Westminster), Balfour, Wemyss, Palmer (Earls of Selborne and Viscounts Wolmer), Cavendish (Dukes of Devonshire and Marquesses of Hartington), and Gathorne-Hardy (Earls of Cranbrook). The Milner Group was originally a major fief within the great nexus of power, influence, and privilege controlled by the Cecil family. It is not possible to describe here the ramifications of the Cecil influence. It has been all-pervasive in British life since 1886. This Cecil Bloc was built up by Robert Arthur Talbot Gascoyne-Cecil, Viscount Cranborne and third Marquess of Salisbury (1830-1903). The methods used by this man were merely copied by the Miler Group. These methods can be summed up under three headings: (a) a triple-front penetration in politics, education, and journalism; (b) the recruitment of men of ability (chiefly from All Souls) and the linking of these men to the Cecil Bloc by matrimonial alliances and by gratitude for titles and positions of power; and (c) the influencing of public policy by placing members of the Cecil Bloc in positions of power shielded as much as possible from public attention.

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When [Alfred] Milner went to South Africa in 1897, Rhodes and he were already old acquaintances of many years' standing... they were contemporaries at oxford, but, more than that, they were members of a secret society which had been founded in 1891. Moreover, Miler was, if not in 1897, at least by 1901, Rhodes's chosen successor in the leadership of that society.

The secret society of Cecil Rhodes is mentioned in the first five of his seven wills. In the fifth it was supplemented by the idea of an educational institution with scholarships, whose alumni would be bound together by common ideals-Rhodes's ideals. In the sixth and seventh wills the secret society was not mentioned, and the scholarships monopolized the estate. But Rhodes still had the same ideals and still believed that they could be carried out best by a secret society of men devoted to a common cause. The scholarships were merely a facade to conceal the secret society, or, more accurately, they were to be one of the instruments by which the members of the secret society could carry out his purpose. This purpose, as expressed in the first will (1877), was:

The extension of British rule throughout the world, the perfecting of a system of emigration from the United Kingdom and of colonization by British subjects of all lands wherein the means of livelihood are attainable by energy, labour, and enterprise, . . . the ultimate recovery of the United States of America as an integral part of a British Empire, the consolidation of the whole Empire, the inauguration of a system of Colonial Representation in the Imperial Parliament which may tend to weld together the disjointed members of the Empire, and finally the foundation of so great a power as to hereafter render wars impossible and promote the best interests of humanity.

To achieve this purpose, Rhodes, in this first will, written while he was still an undergraduate of Oxford at the age of twenty-four, left all his wealth to the Secretary of State for the Colonies (Lord Carnarvon) and to the Attorney General of Griqualand West (Sidney Shippard), to be used to create a secret society patterned on the Jesuits. The reference to the Jesuits as the model for his secret society is found in a "Confession of Faith" which Rhodes had written two years earlier (1875) and which he enclosed in his will. Thirteen years later, in a letter to the trustee of his third will, Rhodes told how to form the secret society, saying, "In considering questions suggested take Constitution of the Jesuits if obtainable and insert 'English Empire' for 'Roman Catholic Religion.'"

In his "Confession of Faith" Rhodes outlined the types of persons who might be useful members of this secret society. As listed by the American Secretary to the Rhodes Trust, this list exactly describes the group formed by Milner in South Africa:

Men of ability and enthusiasm who find no suitable way to serve their country under the current political system; able youth recruited from the schools and universities; men of wealth with no aim in life; younger sons with high thoughts and great aspirations but without opportunity; rich men whose careers are blighted by some great disappointment. All must be men of ability and character . . . . Rhodes envisages a group of the ablest and the best, bound together by common unselfish ideals of service to what seems to him the greatest cause in the world. There is no mention of material rewards. This is to be a kind of religious brotherhood like the Jesuits, "a church for the extension of the British Empire."

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The creation of the secret society was the essential core of Rhodes's plans at all times. Stead, even after Rhodes's death, did not doubt that the attempt would be made to continue the society. In his book on Rhodes's wills he wrote in one place: "Mr. Rhodes was more than the founder of a dynasty. He aspired to be the creator of one of those vast semi-religious, quasi-political associations which, like the Society of Jesus, have played so large a part in the history of the world. To be more strictly accurate, he wished to found an Order as the instrument of the will of the Dynasty, and while he lived he dreamed of being both its Caesar and its Loyola. It was this far-reaching, world-wide aspiration of the man which rendered, to those who knew him, so absurdly inane the speculations of his critics as to his real motives." Sixty pages later Stead wrote: "The question that now arises is whether in the English-speaking world there are to be found men of faith adequate to furnish forth materials for the Society of which Mr. Rhodes dreamed."

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[Cecil] Rhodes wanted to create a worldwide secret group devoted to English ideals and to the Empire as the embodiment of these ideals, and such a group was created.

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The secret society, after so much preliminary talk, took form in 1891, the same year in which Rhodes drew up his fourth will and made Stead as well as Lord Rothschild the trustee of his fortune. It is perfectly clear from the evidence that he expected Rothschild to handle the financial investments associated with the trust, while Stead was to have full charge of the methods by which the funds were used. About the same time, in February 1891, Stead and Rhodes had another long discussion about the secret society. First they discussed their goals and agreed that, if necessary in order to achieve Anglo-American unity, Britain should join the United States. Then they discussed the organization of the secret society and divided it into two circles: an inner circle, "The Society of the Elect", and an outer circle to include "The Association of Helpers" and The Review of Reviews (Stead's magazine, founded 1890). Rhodes said that he had already revealed the plan for "The Society of the Elect" to Rothschild and "little Johnston." By "little Johnston" he meant Harry H. Johnston (Sir Harry after 1896), African explorer and administrator, who had laid the basis for the British claims to Nyasaland, Kenya, and Uganda. Johnston was, according to Sir Frederick Whyte, the biographer of Stead, virtually unknown in England before Stead published his portrait as the frontispiece to the first issue of The Review of Reviews in 1890. This was undoubtedly done on behalf of Rhodes. Continuing their discussion of the membership of "The Society of the Elect," Stead asked permission to bring in Milner and Brett. Rhodes agreed, so they telegraphed at once to Brett...

Within the next few weeks Stead had another talk with Rhodes and a talk with Miler, who was "filled with admiration" for the scheme, according to Stead's notes as published by Sir Frederick Whyte.

The "ideal arrangement" for the secret society, as drawn up in 1891, never came into effect in all its details. The organization as drawn on paper reflected the romantic and melodramatic ideas of Cecil Rhodes and Stead, and doubtless they envisioned formal initiations, oaths, secret signs of recognition, etc. Once Milner and Brett were made initiates, the atmosphere changed. To them secret signs or oaths were so much claptrap and neither necessary nor desirable, for the initiates knew each other intimately and had implicit trust in each other without the necessity of signs or oaths. Thus the melodrama envisioned by Rhodes was watered down without in any way reducing the seriousness with which the initiates determined to use their own personal influence and Rhodes's wealth and power to achieve the consolidation of the British Empire, which they shared as an ideal with Rhodes.

With the elimination of signs, oaths, and formal initiations, the criteria for membership in "The Society of the Elect" became knowledge of the secret society and readiness to cooperate with the other initiates toward their common goal.

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Rhodes and Miler were aiming at the same goals, and had been for twenty-five years, in 1902. They differed slightly on how these goals could be obtained, a difference based on different personalities. To Rhodes it seemed that the ends could be won by amassing great wealth, to Milner it seemed that they could be won by quiet propaganda, hard work, and personal relationships (as he had learned from Toynbee). Neither rejected the other's methods, and each was willing to use the other and his methods to achieve their common dream as the occasion arose. With the death of Rhodes in 1902, Milner obtained control of Rhodes's money and was able to use it to lubricate the workings of his propaganda machine. This is exactly as Rhodes had wanted and had intended. Milner was Rhodes's heir, and both men knew it. Rhodes himself said before his death, "They tell me I can only live five years. I don't mean to die. I want to live. But if I go, there is one man-Sir Alfred Milner. Always trust Milner. You don't know yet what you have got in him." In 1898, in conversation with Stead, Rhodes said, "You will support Milner in any measure that he may take short of war. I make no such limitation. I support Milner absolutely without reserve. If he says peace, I say peace; if he says war, I say war. Whatever happens, I say ditto to Milner."

The goals which Rhodes and Milner sought and the methods by which they hoped to achieve them were so similar by 1902 that the two are almost indistinguishable Both sought to unite the world, and above all the English-speaking world in a federal structure around Britain. Both felt that this goal could best be achieved by a secret band of men united to one another by devotion to the common cause and by personal loyalty to one another. Both felt that this band should pursue its goal by secret political and economic influence behind the scenes and by the control of journalistic, educational, and propaganda agencies.

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The Milner Group has been in eclipse, and it is not clear what has been happening. Its control of The Times, of The Round Table, of Chatham House, of the Rhodes Trust, All Souls, and Oxford generally has continued but has been used without centralized purpose or conviction. Most of the original members of the Group have retired from active affairs; the newer recruits have not the experience or the intellectual conviction, or the social contacts, which allowed the older

**members to wield such great power. The disasters into which the Group directed British policy in the years before 1940 are not such as to allow their prestige to continue undiminished. In imperial affairs, their policies have been largely a failure, with Ireland gone, India divided and going, Burma drifting away, and even South Africa more distant than at any time since 1910. In foreign policy their actions almost destroyed western civilization, or at least the European center of it.**

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**The great idealistic adventure which began with[Arnold] Toynbee and [Alfred] Milner in 1875 had slowly ground its way to a finish of bitterness and ashes.**

